



Music: The Power to Connect

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Abstract: In this editorial the author discusses the power of music to connect individuals to heritage and culture familiar and foreign, to loved ones and strangers, and to aspects of self both known and unknown. These concepts are illustrated with narratives set in a community gamelan rehearsal, a Sikh wedding ceremony, and an impromptu family song writing session.

‘Music is an amazing human adventure and something that needs to be shared.’

– Chris Hadfield, astronaut and commander of the International Space Station (*Music Monday*, May 6, 2013)

Three years ago I was sitting on the floor in front of a *bonang barung*, an instrument of the Javanese gamelan, fabric-wrapped mallets in hand. The leader of the ensemble, Buana, was teaching us a new piece. With unflagging patience he moved from one player to the next, showing each of us what to play on the *gendèr*, *kempul*, *kenong*, *kethuk* and *kempyang*. We were a motley crew of novice gamelan enthusiasts: some music education graduate students, some school of music percussionists, a young professor and a student from across campus, a member of the community. Fortunately, we also had some ringers: Buana’s wife, Sinta, and their daughters Intan and Kasih.

Buana had travelled with his family from Indonesia to Canada to do graduate work. I can only imagine the tremendous challenges of this upheaval, the sacrifices made as this courageous quartet left behind everything and everyone familiar to forge a new life a world away.

A fringe benefit of the gamelan rehearsals, for me, was the chance to come to know this family, and see them in action: the teen and pre-teen daughters supporting (only a little grudgingly) their dad by boosting the numbers – and ability – in our little group. Sinta, their mother, was a godsend to me, unfailingly good-natured as she helped me with my disastrous lack of ability in remembering when to hit what.

Buana continued his travels around the ensemble, eventually kneeling down opposite Sinta, her instrument of metal bars, the *slenthem*, between them. While she played her part, he played a counter melody from the other side of the metallophone. Buana pushed the tempo, and soon their mallets and hands damping the bars were flying as the intricate interlocking parts melded into a shimmering whole. One by one the other members of the

group and I stopped working at our own instruments to gaze in wonder at the virtuosity suddenly on display. Buana and Sinta were locked in to each other, weaving their melodies together in a flurry of movement and iridescent sound. Buana was not looking at the metal bars, but gazing at his wife. Sinta looked up too, hands and mallet still flying back and forth. She caught his eye and grinned.

The tremendous power of the connection between them at that moment was riveting. I could not help but imagine how wonderful it must be for these two to seize this stolen moment and throw aside all the challenges and struggles – everything from unfamiliar academic bureaucracy to economic hardship to teenage daughter needs and angst – to re-connect simply and meaningfully to each other and to the heritage and traditions left behind all at once through the playing of music.

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Three weeks ago I attended a Sikh wedding ceremony, a brand new experience for me. One of my favourite moments was a ritualistic meeting of the families. The clans of the bride and groom faced off outside the temple. The leader of the ceremony called for the groom’s father to come forward and greet the father of the bride. As these two stepped out from their kin drummers – playing double-headed *dhols* – set to, vigorously beating an energetic *Bhangra* dance rhythm. The fathers threw garlands around each other’s necks then clasped each other in a welcoming bear hug. In a display of bravado the father of the groom picked the bride’s dad right up off the ground! This was repeated with mothers, aunts, sisters, uncles, brothers, and so on, all to the celebratory beating of the drums.

Later in the evening, at the reception, a duo performed on sitar and tabla while the wedding guests sipped cocktails and munched pakoras. I stood off to the side, watching them play. Despite the ambivalence of the cocktail crowd, the musicians were fully engaged. They weren’t playing for an audience; they were playing for each other. I sensed the music reaching a rhythmic structural climax, the instrumentalists moving towards each other, coming home from far-flung adventures to land with such satisfaction together on the first beat of the *tala* – the *sam*, the point of resolution. The tabla player smiled and caught the eye of the sitarist, nodding in appreciation of this powerful and immensely satisfying moment of synchronization.

DRAGON FIRE & MIGHTY B

MAX & BEN

Musical staff 1: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: F, Eb, Bb, F, Eb, Bb.

Musical staff 2: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: F, CMIN7, F, CMIN7.

5 IF THERE IS SOME TROU - BLE, SOME TROU - BLE THAT YOU SEE,
THERE MAY BE A FI - RE, SOME KIND OF MYS - TER - Y.

Musical staff 3: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: F, Eb, Bb, C, F, GMIN7, F/A, BbDIM.

7 YOU NEED DRA-GON FIRE AND MIGHT-Y B. BOTH HAVE SUP - ER POW - ERS

Musical staff 4: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: GMIN7, F/A, BbDIM, GMIN7, F/A, BbDIM.

11 DRA-GON FIRE CAN E - LEC-TRO - CUTE! MIGHT-Y B'S GOT MIGHT-Y STRENGTH, AND

Musical staff 5: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: Csus4, C, DMIN, C/E, F, GMIN7.

15 MAN - Y MORE POW'RS TO BOOT! IF YOU ARE FALL-ING OUT A TREE, SCARED OF WHAT YOU SEE,

Musical staff 6: Treble clef, key signature of one flat (Bb), common time. Chords: F/A, Bb6, C7, Csus4, C, F, Eb, Bb, C, F.

19 HI YI YI YI YEE! CALL QUICK-LY... DRA-GON FIRE AND MIGHT-Y B.

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I often hear music advocates touting the power of music to improve cognitive processes, offering up that ubiquitous and seductive image of neurons firing and lighting up lobes all over a musically engaged brain. Researchers suggest musical activity is a form of brain building exercise that can enhance neuro-physiology and result in such benefits as better verbal memory skills (Ho, 2003; Roden 2012) and verbal intelligence (Moreno et al., 2011). While the causal relationship is debatable¹, musical training has been associated with increased spatial abilities and non-verbal reasoning (Costa-Giomi, 2012; Schellenberg and Weiss, 2012) and with IQ (Schellenberg, 2011; Schellenberg and Mankarious, 2012).

This is wonderful news. I am all for neuronal activation; however, as far as I'm concerned, the potential for music to enhance verbal intelligence, spatial abilities, reasoning and the rest is not nearly so exciting as music's potential for connecting people. Just as music can serve to connect neurons within our brains, so too can it serve to connect people within our worlds. I am referring to music's non-scientific power to connect – its spiritual power.

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Three days ago I tried to interest my five year old in playing some piano. He humoured me for about five minutes then took off, with a burning need to dress up as a super hero. Defeated, I sighed and closed the lid of the piano.

Then I had moment of inspiration.

“Hey Max!”

“What?” (A muffled sound, his head thrust deep in the dress-up box.)

“How about we compose a song together, a theme song for...who *are* you, anyway?”

“Dragon Fire!” he responded, without missing a beat, somewhat surprised that I wouldn't know this already. (Of course! How could I not realize that a small boy wearing blue long underwear, red briefs overtop, and a red turtleneck with paper taped to the front featuring a hastily scribbled yellow flame was anyone other than the mighty Dragon Fire?)

“Let's write a song together about Dragon Fire!”

“Well...”

He glanced up the stairs, concerned no doubt about the hapless victims who would have to be left languishing in the clutches of the evil...

“OK.” He climbed back up on the piano bench beside me. I re-opened the lid, and we set to.

Together, we let our imaginations lead us into a super-hero world. With sparkling eyes we launched into the challenge of building a song that could capture it. We threw out words and ideas and sought sounds to match, bursting into laughter when the brainstorming (inevitably) turned ridiculous. We shared the excitement of stumbling across the lyric or chord or pitch that *fit*. “Yes. No... Yes, *Yes!*”

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Music has many super powers. One of my favourites is its power to connect. Music can connect us to heritage and culture famil-

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iar and foreign, to loved ones and strangers, and to aspects of ourselves both known and yet to be discovered.

Music is, indeed, an amazing human adventure.

Post Script

Music Monday 2013 was magnificent – it made me feel very proud indeed to be a Canadian music educator, and to be amongst so many people from so many walks of life joining skills and talents and energies in this celestial celebration of music and education.

A thunderous Bravo to Holly Nimmons and her team at the Coalition for Music Education who brought so many of us together on May 6, 2013 for such a wonderful and amazing human adventure.

¹ Corrigan, Schellenberg and Misura explain: ‘Much previous research may have overestimated the effects of music training and underestimated the role of pre-existing differences between children who do and do not take music lessons’ (2013, p. 9)

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